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ABSTRACT

One approach to teaching business French is to familiarize students with true business situations and to help students realize that business interacts with a body of laws and within a political and socioeconomic environment. On the first day of class, students are divided into groups of two or three, and each group becomes an enterprise with a name, purpose, and legal status. This technique removes student inhibition. In one exercise, students act as legal consultants to an enterprise. Another exercise consists of a mock arbitration procedure played out in groups of three students: a consumer who has purchased a defective automobile, a dealership representative, and an arbitrator. In another activity, students write or act out angry consumer complaints to a customer service department. A selling technique contest has also been undertaken. Activities incorporating the learning of new technology and vocabulary include a simulated telephone conversation with a telecommunications representative, and the writing of extraordinary accident reports using insurance-related language. Oral reports on topics taken from current French magazines are assigned, and a class debate about nationalization policy has been held. Written assignments include correspondence and a marketing study. (MSE)

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THE TEACHING OF BUSINESS FRENCH IN ITS INTERACTION WITH LEGAL, ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL REALITIES

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THE TEACHING OF BUSINESS FRENCH IN ITS INTERACTION WITH LEGAL, ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL REALITIES

My purpose, in this paper, is to elaborate on the various methods which I have used to familiarize students with true business situations and also to make them grasp the fact that business, far from operating in a vacuum, interacts with a body of laws as well as a political and socio-economic environment.

DIVISION INTO GROUPS

In order to achive this objective, on the first day of class, I divide the students into groups of two or three. Each group is an enterprise with a name, a purpose and a legal status. As a result, any member of the newly created enterprise, when asked an "inquisitive" question from the professor, can find refuge behind the corporate veil. I found that this gimmick takes away a significant amount of inhibition and stage fright from the student.

STUDENTS ACTING AS CONSULTANT

To prepare the students to give a written consultation on which legal status is best adapted to their client (here an enterprise), I presented to the class a summary of their most current options under French law: mainly société en nom collectif, société à responsabilité limitée and société anonyme. Since commercial needs for an enterprise and their legal solutions vary little from one country to the next, I drew parallels

between the U.S. concepts of limited partnership, general partnership and corporation and their close counterparts: société à responsabilité limitée, société en nom collectif and société anonyme.

After this comparative analysis, I gave the class a hypothetical situation whereby an enterprise, run by a family, was getting ready to launch a new product on the market. The spcific question each student had to resolve was how could this particular enterprise remain a fairly closed family entity, increase its capital and shelter its members from personal liability.

In this instance, I made clear to the students that they were to advise their client (enterprise) by giving it the pros and the cons of each of the available options. The goal was for the client to reach its own informed decision on the basis of the arguments offered to it. The students, over all, showed an excellent grasp of the concepts and were quite convincing in spite of the facts their arguments varied.

MOCK ARBITRATION PROCEDURE

The mock arbitration which was acted out in class is another means for the students to present opposing arguments in a convincing way. I intend to spend more time on this particular exercise, because I have found it to be one of the most effective pedagogical tools. This class activity was part of the general framework of Sales. I took advantage of the topic to supplement the students' knowledge with product liability and warranty law. Since the majority of my students are composed of International Management students, I thought it proper to give them an overview of their potential liability for putting on the market a defective product.

We, therefore, discussed the notion of defect and covered the different ways a product can be called defective. Then we talked about ways to protect the consumer who has been injured by a defective product. It is in this context that the arbitration procedure was introduced.

I thus divided the class in groups of three. In each group, there was a consumer who had purchased a defective automobile, a dealership representative who had agreed to submit the claim to arbitration, and one arbitrator. Here are the guidelines suggested to the students:

1) The arbitrator greets the protagonists

2) The arbitrator turns first to the claimant (consumer) and asks him/her questions regarding the facts supporting the claim. The arbitrator is already cognizant of the file, but he/she must hear the consumer's version of the facts. The arbitrator may ask for more documents evidencing the facts presented to him/her.

3) The arbitrator then summarizes the facts as understood by him/her.

4) The other party may wish to interrupt because he/she disagrees. It is then the role of the arbitrator to keep him/her quiet until his/her turn to speak.

5) The arbitrator then turns to the other party and follows the same procedure.

6) The arbitrator again addresses the consumer and asks him/her what results he/she seeks to obtain from the procedure.

7) Interruptions are likely to occur, and it is again the arbitrator's role to keep the conflicting parties under control.

8) The arbitrator then turns to the dealership representative to find out what concessions, if any, the dealership is ready to make.

9) The arbitrator tries to reconcile the two viewpoints, emphasizing what they have in common, and then thanks both parties for submitting their claims to arbitration. The final decision is never given to the parties at the end of the arbitration session (available on video).

ANGRY CONSUMER COMPLAINTS

Still in relation to the field of product liability and consumer protection, I made students write or act out angry consumer complaints to the customer service department. The students showed tremendous creativity and humour in this particular exercise (available on video).

Students love to compete. I therefore use this competitive spirit in angry consumer letter contests as well as in selling technique contests (available in video).

The use of a video camera in these instances provides the students with an opportunity to hear their speech, watch their body language and judge their overall performance.

ACTIVITIES INCORPORATING THE LEARNING OF NEW VOCABULARY AND TECHNOLOGY

With the objective of incorporating the latest technology in the field of French telecommunications, I had the students act out a telephone conversation between the telecommunications representative and an individual. This was an opportunity for the telecommunications attendant to advertize the multiple uses of the French Minitel and to end up selling a blind date service to his/her correspondant who admitted being single.

Regarding the subject of Insurance, the students did crosswords puzzles using basic insurance terms and wrote extraordinary accident reports (available on video). Furthermore, they created quite interesting sketches. In one of them, an insurance broker met with the representatives of a corporation, told them about the vulnerability of corporations due to the so called "deep pocket theory" and finally persuaded them to significantly increase their product liability insurance (available on video).

WAYS TO DIVERSIFY AND ENLARGE CLASS MATERIALS

Each of the students has been assigned three oral reports whose topics are taken from Le Monde, L'Express or Le Point. They must summarize the articles read on a subject related to French Business and Economy and be ready to answer questions from their audience.

Since business is part of a country's economy, it is affected by government policy decisions. I consequently found it useful to illustrate this particular aspect in France by presenting to the class arguments which historically have been offered to support a policy of nationalization, and also reasons which led to a more recent move toward denationalization. The students had a debate over the issue.

Finally, to provide the class with additional insight on some of the French 'yuppies', we read excerpts from L'Imprecateur (R.V. Pilhes, Ed. le Seuil, 1975).

OTHER SAMPLES OF WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS: correspondence and papers

In order for the students to appreciate the peculiarity of doing business in France, I multiplied exercises of correspondence between the fictitious enterprises until the students' style, in certain situations, became second nature to them and, after a while, triggered an automatic response to the same stimulus.

In addition, the chapter on Publicity has fully revealed the true creative ability of the class. Each enterpise had to write a marketing study on a brand new product. I gave again strict guidelines:

1) How the idea came about
2) The analysis of the idea
3) Market analysis: Offer and Demand
4) Commercialization of the product: media used and slogan

The results, as mentioned earlier, showed a tremendous level of ingenuity. Let me cite for example:

AD, Acces Decoration, which is a software system made available to architects and interior decorators;

Impogiciel, which makes the payment of taxes nearly a joy for computer owners;

Climatrole, a remote control device, which allows a car owner to start his/her car under any weather conditions;

Feijoa, the newly imported tropical fruit, which is destined to capitalize on health and sophistication;

Last, but not least, Bubbly, the new Champagne whose uniqueness and subtelty of taste are such that one may overlook the occasional explosion of its bottles.

I will end, therefore, this pedagogical report on this bubbly note because I can't think of a more appropriate way to pay homage to my students' endearing cooperation throughout this class.